

RAIN AND DIESEL SPILLAGE HIT RUSSIAN PRACTICE

SOCHI: Formula One fans endured more spills than thrills at the Russian Grand Prix yesterday after a cleaning truck leaked diesel across the circuit before first practice and rain washed out the afternoon session.

Force India's Nico Hulkenberg eventually topped the morning timesheets while Felipe Massa was fastest for Williams after lunch. Neither session offered much for the crowd sheltering in the stands, let alone those viewing from afar, with only eight drivers setting a lap time in the afternoon.

"Today the weather conditions were

not very nice, we could not get much running and we learned pretty much nothing," said Ferrari's Kimi Raikkonen. The Mercedes drivers, whose team could clinch their second successive constructors' title tomorrow, failed to set a time after lunch. They did at least achieve that in the first session, however, with world champion Lewis Hamilton leaving it until the last five minutes to complete a lap and ending up seventh on the timesheets. Hulkenberg led a practice session for the first time this season after banging in a quick lap right at the finish, 0.052 quicker than Mercedes' Nico

Rosberg, for a best time of one minute 44.355 seconds.

Hamilton, who leads team mate Rosberg by 48 points with five races remaining, had been second fastest with two minutes to go as the track got quicker and would have been faster without a late spin.

"Since it almost certainly won't rain for the rest of the weekend, we chose not to do a lot of practice in the wet with the risk it gives to the cars," said Mercedes technical head Paddy Lowe. "It's disappointing for the spectators." The Mercedes drivers did just 34 laps

between them over the two sessions.

The opening 90 minute session was reduced to an hour as workers hosed and cleaned the track following the 'significant' spillage from a truck that had been supposed to sweep the asphalt. When drivers did go out, on wet tyres, it was on a slippery track with ominous rainclouds replacing the early morning sunshine. "What a mess," exclaimed Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel, who was third fastest in the morning and second in the afternoon, over the team radio after driving through the affected turns seven and eight. — Reuters

ECCLESTONE SAYS RED BULL ENGINE SUPPLY IS 'SORTED'

SOCHI: Formula One supremo Bernie Ecclestone played down fears yesterday that former champions Red Bull could walk away from the sport by saying he was confident their engine supply problems were 'sorted'. Without giving any details, and despite reports that Ferrari had joined Mercedes in refusing to supply their rivals with engines for 2016, the 84-year-old sounded upbeat at the Russian Grand Prix.

"Everything's been sorted out so I wouldn't worry about it," he told reporters. "We don't want them to drop out. I think they have sorted it all out now," added the Briton, who said he was confident there would be 22 cars on the starting grid next year with the addition of new team Haas F1. Red Bull's engine predicament has become the talk of the Formula One paddock, with the energy drink company owning two of the 10 teams but potentially having no power units after this season. Red Bull Racing and Toro Rosso are currently supplied by Renault and had a deal for 2016 — but that relationship has soured, with the French manufacturer seemingly set to buy troubled Lotus.

Red Bull's billionaire owner Dietrich Mateschitz has warned the teams will quit unless they have a competitive engine, which leaves only Ferrari and Mercedes-given Honda's woeful performance with McLaren—unless they mend fences with Renault.

Ecclestone said, however, that suggestions Mateschitz had fallen out of love with the sport were wide of the mark. "He's never fallen out of love. He just wants to be in a position where he can be competitive. And that's what will happen. He'll be OK," he said.

Mercedes are already committed to four teams, including their own reigning world champions, and have ruled out providing dominant power units to a rival that could beat them.

Reports have indicated that Ferrari, who are already committed to three teams, would be unable to supply Red Bull with their latest specification units and reluctant also to expand to five teams.

Germany's Auto Motor und Sport reported that Ferrari were willing to supply engines to Italian-based Toro Rosso only. A Ferrari spokesman was unable to give any details about the situation while Red Bull consultant Helmut Marko refused to comment to Reuters.

"There are a lot of negotiations going on, nothing is fixed," Red Bull principal Christian Horner told Sky Sports television. Although Ecclestone had a long meeting with Mercedes motorsport head Toto Wolff and the team's non-executive chairman Niki Lauda on Friday, Wolff said engines had not been discussed and the manufacturer's position had not changed. "It was a conversation about general topics," Wolff told reporters. "Bernie doesn't twist arms, Bernie makes it very subtle," he added. "Honestly, we didn't discuss the topic (of engines)...we didn't change on our opinion." — Reuters



SOCHI: Ferrari's German driver Sebastian Vettel takes pictures with a camera as he waits in the pits during the second practice session of the Russian Formula One Grand Prix at the Sochi Autodrom circuit yesterday. — AFP



PHILADELPHIA: Philadelphia Eagles head coach Chip Kelly walks off the field after an NFL football game against the Dallas Cowboys in Philadelphia. The NFL's coaching hot seat already has burned Joe Philbin in Miami. Torching could happen again in Detroit, Cleveland, San Francisco and, yes, to Chip Kelly in Philadelphia if success doesn't come soon on the field. — AP

DALLAS TO UNLEASH BAD-BOY HARDY ON BRADY AND PATRIOTS

LOS ANGELES: The Dallas Cowboys will unleash controversial new signing Greg Hardy against Tom Brady and the New England Patriots tomorrow as they attempt to stop their injury-ravaged season from sliding into negative territory.

The early optimism of the Cowboys' 2-0 start has been punctured by a devastating array of injuries which have sidelined quarterback Tony Romo, star receiver Dez Bryant, key linebacker Sean Lee and running back Lance Dunbar. The Cowboys have slipped to 2-2 since Romo's absence, a record most pundits expect to become 2-3 after Brady and the free-scoring Patriots' trip to Texas for week five's glamour match-up.

In the circumstances, the availability of defensive end Hardy—banned for the first four games of the season for violating the NFL's personal conduct policy—could not be more timely. Yet several comments made by Hardy this week have underscored the sense of queasiness that accompanied his signing for Dallas in March, which came barely a month after he escaped prosecution for domestic violence charges.

In July last year a judge ruled he had assaulted his ex-girlfriend after hearing evidence that he had dragged her by the hair

and thrown her onto a sofa covered with four semi-automatic weapons and three other guns. However the case ended when Hardy opted for a jury trial and North Carolina prosecutors could not locate his alleged victim, who had reportedly been paid a settlement by the player. Hardy appeared largely unrepentant when speaking to the reporters for the first time this week since he joined the Cowboys, shrugging off questions about domestic violence with a vague statement that "the best way to win a game is stick to the game plan."

Raised eyebrows

He also raised eyebrows with remarks about Brady's supermodel wife, Gisele Bundchen. "I love seeing Tom Brady, he's cool as crap," Hardy said. "Have you seen his wife? I hope she comes to the game. I hope her sister comes to the game, all her friends come to the game." Another less than tactful remark alluding to his desire to come out "all guns blazing" also drew criticism, ultimately prompting head coach Jason Garrett to give Hardy a talking to. "We want to distinguish ourselves with our play, not with what you say," Garrett told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. "(Hardy) understands that now." Brady, meanwhile, the driving force behind

the Patriots and their unbeaten start to the season, responded to Hardy's comments with measured indifference.

"No, I'm just getting ready to play," Brady began when asked if the comments had bothered him. "I'm focused on my job. He's a great player. It takes a lot of different things to handle a guy like that. He's been a great player since he's been in the league...I don't really care about his personal feelings." Elsewhere tomorrow, the Cincinnati Bengals' unbeaten start to the season is likely to face a searching examination from NFC powerhouses the Seattle Seahawks, who have improved to 2-2 after losing their first two games of the season.

A win for the Seahawks would put them firmly back in the frame in the NFC West, with divisional rivals the St. Louis Rams (2-2) facing a daunting trip to Lambeau Field to face Aaron Rodgers and the unbeaten Green Bay Packers, who are 4-0. The Denver Broncos meanwhile will be looking to tighten their grip on the AFC West when they face the Oakland Raiders (2-2) in California.

The Broncos are 4-0 despite misfiring offensively this season, but will put more daylight between themselves and their divisional rivals with a win in Oakland. — AFP